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SUBJECT: PM CLARK REBUKES MINISTER FOR BROADSIDE AT US IRAQ POLICY

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) On January 12th, Jim Anderton, the New Zealand Government's Duty Minister at the time, launched a blistering attack on President Bush's plan to send more troops to Iraq. PM Helen Clark and Foreign Minister Winston Peters quickly disavowed Anderton's comments, and the PM removed him as Duty Minister within the day. As a result, Clark especially has been roundly criticized by many ordinary Kiwis and the NZ media, who tend to agree with Anderton. The PM was also assailed by the Greens, who accused her of cuddling up to the U.S., and by National, who claimed that Anderton was repeating what the Labour Government really thinks. To our mind, the PM's quick work to tamp down Anderton's remarks demonstrates that she recognizes the GNZ needs to improve the tone of its rhetoric if it is to build bridges with the U.S. It also proves she is prepared pay a price for this at home. End Summary

What Anderton said

¶2. (SBU) On January 12th Jim Anderton, then the Government's Duty Minister, was asked by a reporter from the Christchurch Press for Government reaction on President Bush's decision to send more troops to Iraq. Although the President had not yet delivered his speech, Anderton roundly criticized not just the new initiative but the Iraq war in general. He compared the Iraq campaign to the mistakes of Napoleon and Genghis Khan, adding that "it is hard to see how additional 20,000-25,000 troops are going to be capable of making any real difference." Anderton, the Government's third-ranked Minister, further wondered "whether the lessons I would have expected to be learnt from (Vietnam) have been learnt in any way at all." Anderton claimed that the Government's views "remain consistent with our [GNZ] original view about military action not being a sustainable or long-term contributor to the peaceful development of Iraq."

¶3. (SBU) When the journalist informed the Embassy's Media Specialist about Anderton's comments and asked for comment, the DCM immediately alerted Carl Worker, Director of the Americas Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and stressed the importance of the New Zealand Government at senior political levels disavowing this position. Worker said he would immediately inform the PM's office.

PM Clark quick to admonish Anderton

¶4. (SBU) Within hours after the DCM's call to MFAT, Clark distanced

herself from Anderton's comments. In a statement released to the media, Clark claimed that Anderton had spoken as leader of the coalition Progressive Party and a local MP, not on behalf of the Government. Said Clark, "President Bush today announced a revised US strategy for Iraq based on several major elements. They include the Iraqi Government taking the lead in confronting the insurgency; improving internal political dialogue and economic progress in Iraq, encouraging Arab state support for the Iraqi Government; and increasing the number of US troops deployed." She noted that "attempts to bring peace to Iraq have foundered in the face of a bitter insurgency, marked by sectarian violence. The current situation in Iraq is also destabilizing within the region." Clark added that "Iraq faces enormous challenges and the situation there is of great concern to New Zealand and the international community." MFAT informed the Embassy that Clark had also decided to replace Anderton as Duty Minister within a day, and ordered him not to comment further on the matter, and instructed that the USG be informed of this action.

Foreign Minister Peters critical of Anderton

¶15. (SBU) Foreign Minister Winston Peters backed Clark's view and publicly called Anderton's comments "ill-informed and regrettable." In a statement issued from Cebu, where he was attending the East Asia Summit, Peters noted that the comments "certainly do not reflect the views of the Government."

Clark's Move Catches Flak from Public and Media

¶16. (SBU) Clark's decision to slap down Anderton has put her very much on the wrong side of popular opinion in New Zealand, as she undoubtedly anticipated it would. Polls have found that most NZers endorsed Anderton's comments and were highly critical of Clark's reaction. An unscientific and voluntary poll by New Zealand media website Stuff.co.nz showed almost 80 per cent of the more than 3500 respondents agreed Iraq was becoming another Vietnam.

¶17. (SBU) By and large, editorials have similarly disapproved of Clark's actions. Whilst most NZ editors gave Anderton low marks for

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diplomacy, they awarded him high marks for courage and honesty. In contrast, Clark's decision not back Anderton was roundly criticized, with one editorial describing it as "nothing more than a shallow and transparent attempt at diplomatic face-saving." A week on, the papers are still publishing readers' letters about the incident, few of which support what Clark did. While we suspect many Kiwis do agree with the Prime Minister, the majority of those who have spoken out clearly do not.

Clark also faces political heat

¶18. (SBU) In addition to broad public and media criticism, Clark received political flak as well. National Party leader John Key claimed the comments simply reflected what Anderton had heard around the Cabinet table and would weaken the Government's attempts to improve relations with the US. Green Party co-leader Jeanette Fitzsimons claimed that the controversy revealed Clark's true colors. She said, "...the fact that Clark has been willing to bag her closest coalition partner in order to keep relations with the US friendly is not something I would have expected from a leader who just three years ago inspired New Zealand by refusing to bow to pressure to join the Coalition of the Willing."

¶19. (SBU) Ironically, perhaps, we believe Fitzsimons got it exactly right. PM Clark made a decision few would have expected three years ago to protect her Government's relationship with the United States, even though important left wing supporters disapproved.

McCormick